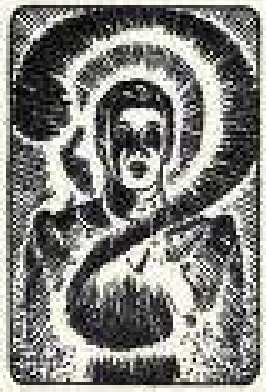
The Dimension of Chance

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

On the trail of a future Jap spy, a pair of Americans are cast through the stratosphere into a strange atomic world

CHAPTER I

Pursuit into What?



"BETTER get that pea-shooter ready," warned Markley through the audiphone from his seat at the controls of the rocket plane. "At this rate we'll come within range in a few minutes. Those Japs are good gunners, and they'll have a red-hot welcome for us."

Clement Morris, Secret Service operative and college chum of Andrew Markley, his pilot, in a swift and dangerous chase, inspected the cartridge-belt of the new and incredibly rapid-firing machine-gun, behind which he sat in lieu of the official gunner. Then he resumed his watching of the bright metallic speck that they followed in the thin, dark, stirless air of the stratosphere, twelve miles above the eastward-flowing blur that was Nevada.

They were beginning to overhaul the Japanese plane that had picked up the fleeing spy, Isho Sakamoto, near Ogden. Morris had been tracking down this preternaturally clever spy for months, under Government orders. Sakamoto was believed to have procurred plans of many American fortifications, as well as information regarding projected army movements in the war against the Sino-Japanese Federation that had begun a year before, in 1975.

The enemy rocket plane, descending unexpectedly from the isothermal regions, had rescued Sakamoto at the very moment when Morris was about to corner him. Morris had immediately commandeered the services of his old friend Markley of the Air Corps, then stationed at Ogden.

Markley's rocket plane was said to be one of the swiftest in the entire Corps. In its air-tight hull, with oxygen-tanks, helmets and parachutes already donned in case of accident, the two men were speeding onward at an acceleration so terrific that it held them in their seats as if with leaden strait-jackets. Morris, however, was little less accustomed to such flights than Markley himself. It was not the first time that they had hunted down some national foe or traitor in company.

They drove on betwen the dark-blue heavens and the dim Earth with its mottlings of mountains and desert. The roar of the rockets was strangely thin in that rarefied air. Before them the light of the stark sun, falling westward, glittered on the wings and hull of the Japanese as if on some great silver beetle. They were many miles from the usual lanes of stratosphere traffic. No other vessels rode the windless gulf through which pursued and pursuer plunged toward the Sierras and the far Pacific.

Less than a mile now intervened betwixt the two vessels. There was no sign of overt hostility from the Japanese, which carried a heavy machine-gun equal in range to that of the American ship and was manned by a professional gunner as well as by Sakamoto and the pilot. Morris began to calculate the range carefully. It would be a fair fight, and he thrilled at the prospect.

The spy, at all costs, must not be permitted to reach San Francisco, where the enemy had established a hard-won base. If the fight should go against them, he or Markley as a

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EDITOR'S NOTE

SOME stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time.

Because "The Dimension of Chance," by Clark Ashton Smith, has stood this test, it has been nominated for SCIENTIFICATION'S HALL OF FAME and is reprinted here.

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A headless thing with ropy arms and a puckered, mouth-like orifice tried to drag Morris down.

last resort would summon other planes by radio, from one of the American bases in California, to intercept Sakamoto.

Far off, through the inconceivably clear air on the enormously extended horizon, he could see the faint notching of the Californian mountains. Then, as the planes hurtled on, it seemed to him that a vague, misty blur, such as might appear in sun-dazzled eyes, had suddenly developed in mid-air beyond the Japanese.

The blur baffled him, like an atmospheric blind spot, having neither form nor hue nor delimitable outlines. But it seemed to enlarge rapidly and to blot out the map-like scene beyond in an inexplicable manner.

Markley had also perceived the blur.

"That's funny," he roared through the audiphone. "Anything in the shape of mist or cloud would be altogether impossible at this height. Must be some queer kind of atmospheric phenomenon—the mirage of a remote cloud, perhaps, transferred to the isothermal layer. But I can't make it out."

Morris did not answer. Amazement checked the somewhat inconsequential remark that rose to his lips. At that moment the Japanese rocket plane appeared to enter the mysterious blur, vanishing immediately from vision as if in actual cloud or fog. There was a quick, tremulous gleaming of its hull and wings, as if it had started to fall or had abruptly changed its course—and then it was gone behind the hueless and shapeless veil.

"That's funnier still," commented Markley in a puzzled voice. "But they can't shake us by flying into any mirage or what-you-may-call-it. We'll soon pick them up on the other side."

DIVING horizontally ahead at six hundred miles per hour, the vessel neared the strange blur, which had now blotted out a huge section of the sky and world. It was

like a sort of blindness spreading on the upper air. But it did not convey the idea of darkness or of anything material or tangible.

Both Morris and Markley, as they neared it, felt that they were peering at something virtually beyond the scope of human vision. They seemed to grope for some ungraspable image—an unearthly shadow that fled from sight—a thing that was neither dark nor light nor colored with any known hue.

An instant more and the blur devoured the heavens with terrible momentum. Then, as the plane rushed into it, a blindness fell on the two men. They could no longer discern the vessel's interior or its ports. Ineffable greyness, like an atmosphere of cotton-wool, enveloped them and seemed to intercept all visual images.

The roar of the rockets had ceased at the same time, and they could hear nothing. Markley tried to speak, but the oath of astonishment died unuttered in his throat as if before a barrier of infrangible silence. He might have entered some unfamiliar medium, neither air nor ether, that was wholly void and negative, one which refused to carry the vibrations of light, color and sound.

They had lost the sense of movement, too, and could not tell whether they were flying or falling or were suspended immovably in the weird vacuum. Nothing seemed able to touch or reach them. The very sense of time was gone, and their thoughts crawled sluggishly, with a dull confusion, a dreamy surprise, in the all-including void. It was like the preliminary effect of an anaesthetic—a timeless, bodiless, weightless hovering in the gulf that borders upon oblivion.

Suddenly, like the lifting of a curtain, the blindness cleared away. In a strange, flickering, brownish-red light, the men saw the interior of the hull and beheld each other's goggled helmets and leatheroid air-suits. They became aware that the vessel was falling gently and obliquely, with slanted floor. The rocket explosions had wholly ceased, though Markley had not touched the controlling lever.

He could not start them again. The entire mechanism refused any longer to obey his control. Through the ports, he and Morris saw a multi-colored chaos of outlandish and incomprehensible forms, into which the plane was descending slowly, with incredible lightness, like a downward-floating leaf or feather.

"I don't know what has happened or where we are," said Markley. "But I guess we might as well sit tight. There's no need to jump—we couldn't go down any more safely with parachutes. But what the heck have we gotten into, anyway?"

"Can't say," rejoined his companion, equally dumfounded and at a loss. "Whatever the place is, it's not the state of Nevada."

Their descent toward the unknown, mysterious terrain seemed to occupy many minutes. Once or twice the vessel hung motionless for a moment, then resumed its gliding with a jerk. Staring from the ports in ever-growing bewilderment, they began to distinguish separate forms and masses in the queer chaos of scenery.

Irregular hills, mottled with grey, green, ocher and violet-black, lifted about them in the rufous light, and they perceived that they were settling into a kind of valley-bottom. The ground beneath them was partly bare, partly covered with objects that resembled vegetable growths more than anything else.

These plants or plant-like things, as the plane settled closer above them, displayed a remarkable diversity of shape, size and hue, ranging from leafless, limbless stems to great tree-forms with a crowded foliation that suggested some impossible crossing of araucaria and banana. The whole impression of this flora, even at that first glimpse, was one of lawless variety and illimitable grotesquery.

The vessel slanted slowly down on an open, level tract, narrowly missing the tops of some of the taller growths. It landed with a light jar, little more pronounced than if it had been checked by the usual process of careful deceleration.

Markley and Morris peered out on a scene that amazed them more and more as they began to perceive its innumerable oddities of detail. For the nonce they forgot the Japanese rocket plane they had been following, did not even speculate regarding its fate or whereabouts.

"Jumping Christopher!" cried Markley. "Mother Nature certainly was inventive when she designed this place. Look at those plants—no two of them alike. And the soil would give a geologist the nightmare." He was now peering at the ground about the vessel, which offered a remarkable mosaic of numberless elements—a conglomeration of parti-colored soils, ores, and mineral forms, wholly unstratified and chaotic.

It was mostly bare and broken into uneven mounds and hummocks, but here and there, in patches of poisonous-looking clay or marl, peculiar grasses grew, with blades that varied in the same manner as the larger growths. One might well have imagined that each blade belonged to a separate genus.

Not far away was a clump of trees, exhibiting monstrous variations in their leafage, even when there was a vague likeness of bole or branch. It seemed as if the laws of type had been disowned—as if each individual plant were a species in itself.

A STREAM of some water-like fluid, varying strangely from peacock blue to cloudy amber in its course, ran past the

fallen plane and meandered through the valley toward a barren slope at one end. From this slope another stream appeared to descend and join it, flowing in a series of rapids and low cascades from a hill-top that melted indistinctly into the reddish-brown heavens.

"Well," observed Markley, after contemplating this milieu with a quizzical and slightly troubled frown, "the problem of how we got here is equaled in its abstruseness only by the problem of how we are going to get away. Somehow or other, we have fallen into a foreign world and are now subject to unfamiliar physical laws. Our nitrone fuel simply won't explode. There's something—the Lord alone knows what—that prevents combustion."

"Sure the tubes are all right?" queried Morris. "Maybe we've run short of fuel."

"*Huh!*" the tone was superbly contemptuous. "I know this boat. There's nothing the matter with the rocket mechanism. And I loaded up to the limit with nitrone before we started. We could have chased Sakamoto to the Great Wall of China and back again if necessary without refueling.

I tell you, we're up against something that was omitted from the text-books. Just look at this ungodly hole, anyway. It's like the scrambled hallucinations of a hundred cases of delirium tremens."

"I've monkeyed with hashish and peyote beans in my time," said Morris, "but I'll admit that I never saw anything like this. However, we're probably missing a lot by staying in the ship. What do you say to a little promenade? Sakamoto and his friends maybe somewhere in the neighborhood. If they are, I'd like to get a line on them."

Very cautiously the two men unstrapped themselves from their seats and arose. In spite of their heavy garments, they felt a queer physical lightness that argued a lesser gravitation than that of Earth. This no doubt accounted for the leisurely fall of the plane. They almost seemed to float about the hull and found great difficulty in controlling and calculating their movements.

They had brought along a few sandwiches and a thermos bottle of coffee. These, their sole provisions, they decided to leave in the plane. Both carried automatic pistols of a new type which fired fifteen shots with terrifically high-powered ammunition having almost the range of rifles.

After making sure that these pistols were ready in the holsters which formed part of their leatheroid garments, and after retesting their oxygen-tanks and helmets, the men opened the sealed door of the hull by means of a spring apparatus.

The air of the valley, as far as they could tell, was still and windless. It seemed to be quite warm, and they were forced to shut off the heating-mechanism in their suits, which they had turned on against the zero of the stratosphere.

Almost vertically overhead a heavy and lopsided sun glared down, pouring out its light like a visible flood of reddish-brown liquid. A few clouds with unearthly forms floated idly about the sun. Far off in the lower heavens, above dim slopes and crags, other clouds went racing by as if driven by a mad tempest.

Trying to determine the course of their descent into the valley, Morris and Markley perceived an aerial blur at one point in the heavens—a blur similar to, perhaps identical with, the one into which they had flown above Nevada.

This blur, it occurred to Markley, was perhaps formed by the meeting or overlapping of two different kinds of space and was the entrance between their own world and the alien dimension into which they had been precipitated. It was visible in the reddish air like the "ropiness" or cloudy nucleus that sometimes appears in a clear wine. And it was completely mystifying.

"Which way shall we go?" queried Markley, as he and Morris surveyed the valley on all sides, perceiving much that they had not seen from the plane. At the end that had been previously hidden, the vari-colored stream emerged from a narrowing defile of madly-tilted cliffs and pinnacles, hued as with petrified rainbows.

On both sides of the valley were long, irregular slopes and barren bluffs, looming vaguely above areas of fantastic forestation. One of these areas, lying on the right hand, approached in a sort of arc to within a hundred yards of the rocket plane, like the bastion of some unearthly fortress.

"I move that we head for the nearest timber," said Morris, indicating this mass of grotesquely varied growths. "I have a feeling, somehow, that I'd like to get under cover as quickly as possible. There's no telling, of course, but I have an intuition that Sakamoto and his compatriots are somewhere in the vicinity."

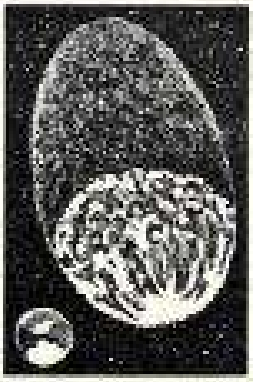
"Their visibility is pretty poor if they are," commented Markley. "We may have lost them altogether—maybe they got safely through that atmospheric blind spot, or fell into a more remote section of this ungodly world."

"Well, I'm not taking any more chances than I have to. I don't care for the idea of a soft-nosed Japanese bullet in the small of my back."

"If rocket fuel won't explode in this world, there's no certainty that cartridges will either," Markley pointed out. "But, anyway, we might just as well take a look at the woods over there."

CHAPTER II

The World of Chance



THEY started off toward the forest, trying to control the absurd lightness that sent them bounding for twenty feet or more. After a few paces, however, they found that their weight was increasing rapidly, as if they had entered a zone of stronger gravitation.

They took one or two steps that were almost normal—and then floated off in ludicrous leaps of a dozen yards that were checked suddenly as if by another belt of increased gravity.

The trees, which had seemed so near, retreated in a strange and disconcerting fashion. At length, after many minutes of variable progression, the men saw the wood looming immediately before them and could study its details.

High in the heavens, above all the other growths, there towered two incredibly elongated boles such as might be seen in the delirium of hashish. About them a medley of lesser forms, no two of which displayed the same habit, leaned and crawled and squatted or massed themselves in monstrous tangles.

There were single plants that combined enormous moon-shaped leaves with others that were fern-like or lanceolate. Gourd-like fruits grew on the same tree with others in the forms of tiny plums and huge melons. Everywhere there were flowers that made the most ornate terrestrial orchids appear simple and rudimentary as daisies in comparison.

All was irregular and freakish, testifying to a haphazard law of development. It seemed that this whole chaotic cosmos in which the men found themselves had been shaped from atoms and electrons that had formed no fixed patterns of behavior, whose one controlling law was chance.

Nothing, apparently, was duplicated. The very stones and minerals were anomalous. What further irregularities they would encounter Morris and Markley could not guess. In a world subject to chance everything would be incalculable. The action of the simplest natural laws would be wholly erratic and independable. A horror of this lawless world gradually arose in them.

So far, they had met no form of animal life. Now, as they neared the forest, a creature that was like a poddy and spider-legged serpent came down as if from the heavens on one of the preposterously tall boles, running swiftly. The men stepped toward the tree, trying to decide which end of this curious creature was the head and which the tail.

Like a mirage the forest faded away with their change of position. They saw its fantastic tops at a seeming distance of many hundred yards, in an oblique direction. Turning, they found that the whole valley, during their brief journey, had shifted about and had recomposed itself beyond all recognition.

They were unable to locate the rocket plane for some moments—but finally, in an opposite quarter and seemingly much further away than they had supposed, they discerned the gleam of its wings and hull.

Before them, in lieu of the forest, was an open space in which the vari-colored stream had mysteriously reappeared. Beyond the stream arose plots of scattered vegetation, backed by opalescent cliffs.

"The late Professor Einstein would have been interested in this," remarked Morris. "Even the light must be moving at random, and sight images are traveling in zig-zags and circles. Nothing is where it ought to be. We've gotten into a labyrinth of mirages."

"We'll be lucky if we ever find our way back to the old boat," snorted Markley. "Want to look any further for our Japanese friends?"

Morris did not answer at once. His eye had caught a silvery glint, close to one of the far-off plots of vegetation beyond the stream. He pointed it out to his companion silently. Three dark, moving specks, doubtless the figures of men, appeared beside the glint as they watched.

"There they are," said Morris. "Looks as if they were starting for a pasear themselves or were just returning from one. Shall we try to interview them?"

"You're the captain, old scout. I'm game if you are. Lead on, MacDuff."

Temporarily forgetting the highly illusive refraction of the weird scenery, they started toward the stream, which appeared to be only a few paces away and which they could easily cross at a step if the light gravity prevailed in its neighborhood.

By another astonishing shift the stream moved away from them, reappearing in a different quarter at a considerable distance—and the gleam of the Japanese rocket plane and its attendant human specks had vanished from view.

"I guess we'll play tag with some more mirages," opined Markley in a disgusted tone. "Even if guns will shoot in this crazy world, there's small likelihood that we could hit anyone or that anyone could hit us."

More deeply bewildered than ever, they pressed forward, trying to relocate the enemy vessel. The changing zones of gravity made

their progress erratic and uncertain. The landscape melted and shifted around them like the imagery of a kaleidoscope.

A clump of crowded vegetation, rearing its anomalous boles and monstrous leafage as if from nowhere, leaped into place before them. Rounding the clump, which seemed relatively stable, they came suddenly in sight of the Japanese, who, in air-suits and helmets, were now standing on the opposite brink of the apparently nearby water.

WHETHER or not Sakamoto and his fellows had seen the Americans was uncertain. They were staring in the direction of Morris and Markley, who did not wait for decisive proof that the enemy had perceived them, but drew their automatics and aimed quickly, each choosing one of the two nearest figures.

Somewhat to their surprise in view of the various baffling and topsy-turvy phenomena they had encountered, the pressure of the triggers was followed by a sharp double report. The Japanese, however, did not seem to realize that they were being fired at. Their apparent nearness and relative position were no doubt illusory.

Markley and Morris, recognizing this probability did not shoot again, but sprang forward in an effort to approach the deceptive figures. The Japanese vanished. The whole valley seemed to swirl in a semi-circle and rearrange itself. The two Americans found themselves at the foot of that barren slope from which, in their first remote view of the place, a second stream had appeared to descend and join the meandering creek.

From their new and close vantage, however, there was only one stream, which, flowing down the valley-bottom against the barring slope, ran turbulently uphill in a series of skyward-leaping rapids and cascades!

Too astonished even for profanity, they stared without comment at this unique reversal of what they were accustomed to regard as natural law. For a considerable distance on either side of the stream the acclivity was hollowed and worn smooth as if by landslides or a process of slow attrition.

Occasionally, as the men stood watching it, a pebble, a lump of conglomerate soil, or a few particles of grit were loosened from the ground, to roll heavenward rapidly and disappear beyond the ragged crest of the slide together with the cascading waters.

Drawn by thoughtless curiosity and wonder, Morris stepped toward the beginning of the slope, which was perhaps ten feet away. It was like stepping over a precipice. The ground seemed to tilt beneath him, and the slope fell like an overturning world, till it pitched downward at a steep angle with the sky at its bottom.

Unable to arrest his strange fall, he slid sidelong into the rushing water and was carried roughly and dizzily down the rapids and over the cascades. Half-dazed and breathless, he felt that he was shooting across the world's rim toward a nether gulf in which hung the fallen sun.

Markley, seeing his companion's weird fate, also started toward the acclivity with some dim instinctive idea of rescuing Morris from the inverted stream. A single step, and he too was seized by the skyward gravitation. Slipping, rolling and bumping as if in a steep chute, unable to regain his foothold, he slid along the topsy-turvy slope, followed by a shower of detritus, but without falling into the water.

He and Morris, passing the rim of the slide as if hurled toward the reddish-brown sky that was now beneath them, each experienced another bewildering bouleversement. Morris found himself floundering in a sort of hilltop pool, where the final cascade foamed itself into quiescence. Markley, stunned and sprawling, but with unbroken bones, was lying on a pile of rubble such as would ordinarily gather at the bottom of an escarpment.

Morris scrambled from the pool, which was only waist-deep, and helped Markley to his feet. The local gravity was almost normal from a terrene viewpoint. Plainly all objects that were drawn skyward along the deficiently attractive area were promptly arrested when they reached the top. Headlong and turbulent, the cascade curved over the rim into the level pool.

The earth-men, finding themselves quite unhurt, proceeded to examine their air-suits and helmets for possible damage. Since the local atmopshere was untested, and might well possess deleterious properties, a rift in the leatheroid fabric would perhaps be a serious matter. The suits, however, were intact, and the tubes that supplied oxygen from flat tanks behind the shoulders were in perfect condition.

The height that they had climbed in so singular a fashion was really part of an uneven plateau that appeared to surround the whole valley. The plateau was divided by long hummocks of mottled soil and stone which rose gradually into bleak uplands and low mountains at a seeming distance of several miles.

From their present vantage point, the valley below was an immense sink. They saw the entire course of the tortuous stream, the areas of *outré* vegetation, and the gleaming of some metallic object which they assumed to be their own rocket plane. The Japanese plane was not visible, and was perhaps hidden by one of the plots of forestation.

Of course, remembering the optical dis-

tortion and displacement which they had encountered so often in their wanderings, they could not be sure of the actual distance, perspective and relationship of the various elements in this bizarre scenery.

TURNING again from the valley, they considered the plateau itself. Here the stream, running in a normal and tranquil fashion, entered a ravine and disappeared. The whole landscape was intolerably dreary and repellent, with the same chaotic mineral formation as the valley, but without even the valley's anomalous plant-life to relieve its deadly desolation.

The lopsided sun, declining very swiftly or else subject to the nearly universal optic transposition, had already fallen halfway from its zenith toward the horizon of amorphous mountains in what the men estimated to be less than an hour. The clouds had all melted away, but far off, above the valley, they could still discern the mysterious aerial blurred spot.

"I guess we'd better mosey back toward the boat," said Markley, after viewing the barren scene with obvious horror. "But we won't try to go the way we came. If we follow the rim of the valley, we ought to find a place where the gravitation won't drag us the wrong way."

Made doubly cautious by their disconcerting experiences, they started along the verge of the sink. For some distance, the ground was littered with detritus, and even with loose boulders that had rolled upward to be arrested at the top. When they came to the end of this rubble, they surmised that they were beyond the belt of reverse gravitation.

Following the rim toward a point where the slope became more gradual, they came suddenly into a zone of heavier gravity than any they had yet entered. At one step their weight appeared to treble. A crushing burden descended upon them, and they could lift their feet only with immense effort.

Struggling against the uncanny pull of the strange earth and on the verge of panic they heard an indescribable clattering and rustling behind them, and turned their heads laboriously to ascertain the cause.

Emerging as if from empty air, a concourse of unimaginably monstrous beings had gathered at their very heels on the bleak verge of the plateau. There were scores of hundreds of these entities, who, whether mere beasts or the analogues of humanity, were no less various and freakish in their conformation than the weird flora of the valley-bottom.

Obviously there was no common norm or type of development as in terrestrial species. Some of the entities were no less than twelve or thirteen feet tall. Others were squat pygmies. Limbs, bodies and sense-organs were equally diversified and equally of nightmare quality.

One creature was like a prodigious moonfish mounted on stilts. Another was a legless, rolling globe fringed about the equator with prehensile ropes that served to haul it along by attaching themselves to projections. Still another resembled a wingless bird with a great falcon beak and a tapering serpentine body with lizard legs, that glided half-erect.

Some of the creatures possessed double or triple bodies. And some were hydra-headed or equipped with an excessive number of limbs, eyes, mouths, ears and other anatomical features.

Truly these beings were the spawn of chance, the random creations of a lawless biological force. A horde of fabulous, fantastic, nightmare improbabilities, they surged forward upon Morris and Markley, uttering a babel of wordless sounds, of cacklings, hisses, clucks, ululations, roarings and bellowings. Whether they were hostile or merely curious the men could not decide. Both were petrified with a horror beyond the horror of evil dreams. Not one of the creatures emitted a comprehensible sound.

The leaden gravitational drag, rendering the least movement slow and toilsome, reenforced their sensation of nightmare. Laboriously they drew their pistols and, half-lifting them at the oncoming rout, pulled the triggers. The reports were dull and muffled. The bullets flew with visible slowness and rebounded harmlessly like tossed pebbles from the monsters that they struck. But their slow-motion qualities were not matched by the monsters at which they aimed.

Like a stampeding herd, the throng of biologic horrors was upon Morris and Markley. Battling against the gravity as well as against the loathsome bodies and members that engulfed them, they were borne irresistably along by the seething mass. Their pistols were torn from their hands, leaving them unarmed and helpless.

They saw hideous faces and faceless things that milled about them like a torrent of the damned in some nether circle. Occasionally, in broken glimpses, they saw a disordered landscape of amorphous rock with pools and streams of fine sand and sudden, fortuitous vegetation like mad mirages, through which they were being carried.

The origin of the monsters, their purpose, their destination, their intentions in regard to the earthmen, were enigmatic as the riddles of delirium. Resistance was futile. Morris and Markley gave themselves up to the rushing motion of the throng in the hope that some opportunity of escape would ultimately offer itself.

CHAPTER III

The Masters of Chance

THEY seemed to go on for hours. The gravitation still varied, but was often constant over large areas. The sun, instead of sinking further, rose again to the zenith. Sometimes there were brief intervals of darkness, as if the light had been shut off by some queer fluctuation of atmospheric properties.

Puffs of wild wind arose and died. Rocks and whole hummocks seemed to crumble abruptly on the waste. But through all this chaos of conditions, the monstrous horde poured onward with its captives.

Apparently the earthmen had fallen in with a whole tribe of these anomalous creatures, who were perhaps migrating from one zone of their random world to another. At least, such was the explanation that suggested itself in lieu of positive knowledge.

Markley and Morris became aware that the ground was slanting downward. Over the heads of the monsters, they saw that they had entered a flat, sloping valley. Rough mountains, perhaps the same that they had seen from the rim of the sink, appeared to loom at no great distance above them.

The low valley debouched in a shallow, craterlike hollow. Here the horde suddenly arrested it onward rush and began to spread out in a curious manner. Markley and Morris, now able to work their way forward, saw that the creatures had arranged themselves in a ring about the slopes of the circular hollow, leaving a clear space at its bottom.

In the center of the vacant space a singular phenomenon was manifesting itself. A fountain of fine, hueless powder rose from the stone and soil, attaining a height of three feet. Slowly it widened and rose higher, preserving the form of a round column.

Its top mushroomed into a vague cloud, spreading above the heads of the assembled throng and floating skyward. It was as if some process of molecular dissolution were taking place to create this formation.

Markley and Morris were fascinated by the spectacle. Before them, the silent, circular crumbling of the ground went on. The column swelled to Titanic proportions, towering above the crater. Seemingly the monsters too were fascinated, for none of them stirred to break the ring-like formation.

Then, gradually, as the column of atoms increased, the horde began to surge forward. The ring narrowed till its inmost ranks were driven, close-packed, into the fountain by the pressure from behind. Visibly, as the creatures entered it, their limbs and bodies melted like bursting puff-balls, to swell the columnar cloud of dissolution that mounted skyward.

"Are they all going to commit suicide and take us with them?" Markley's voice was a horror-tautened whisper. He and Morris, caught in the forward ranks, were being forced slowly toward the fountain. Only two rows of the monsters now intervened, and even as Markley spoke, the bodies of the inmost row began to dissolve in the column.

The earthmen struggled desperately against the massed bodies that crowded from behind. But the living wall, close and implacable, as if bent on nothing but self-immolation, drove downward inch by inch.

Overhead, the sun was blinded by the mushrooming column. The sky took on a madder-brown twilight. Then, with a suddenness as of some atmospheric legerdemain, the twilight blackened into Cimmerian darkness.

A mad, elemental howling tore the air, a blind hurricane filled the crater, blowing as if from above. Bolts of lightning leapt upward from the ground, enshrouding with blue and violet fire the horrible horde of biologic anomalies.

The pressure behind the earthmen relaxed. A panic seemed to have seized the monsters, who were now dispersing in the bolt-riven darkness. The earthmen, fighting their way upward, stumbled over the half-charred bodies of those who had been slain by the lightning.

By intermittent flashes, they saw on looking back that the column of atomic dissolution still poured from the crater's bottom to merge with the seething storm that had risen as if at random from nowhere.

Miraculously untouched by the lightning, Morris and Markley found themselves in the flat valley through which they had entered the crater. Most of the monsters had now disappeared, melting away like the shadows of a nightmare. The last flashes revealed little but vacant soil and rock.

The lightning ceased, leaving the men in darkness. An irresistable wind, like a torrent of rushing water, bore them along through the Stygian night and they lost all trace of each other. Often hurled headlong, or lifted bodily from the ground at the mercy of lawless, anarchic elements, they were blown apart like lost leaves.

Abruptly as it had begun, the tumult fell in a great stillness. The darkness dissolved from the heavens. Morris, lying dazed and breathless, found himself alone amid barren reaches of rock and sand.

He could trace nothing familiar in the landscape. The mountains were lost to view, and he saw no sign of the fountain of molecules. It was as if he had ben transported to another tract of this fantastic realm of chance.

Halloing loudly, but answered only by sardonic echoes, he started off at random in an effort to find Markley. Once or twice, amid the shifting, illusive imageries through which he wandered, he thought that he saw the mountains which had loomed beyond the crater of dissolution.

THE sun, changing its apparent position by leaps and bounds, was now close to the horizon and its rays were indescribably dark and eerie. Morris, plodding doggedly on amid the delusive advances and recessions of the dreary landscape, came without warning to a flat area that was somehow familiar. Before him the lost mountains reappeared as if by magic. Going on, he emerged in the crater-like hollow.

Many of the charred monsters, slain by the electric storm were strewn about the slopes. But the fountain itself was no longer active. A round, funnel-like pit, twenty feet in diameter, yawned dark and silent at the bottom of the hollow.

Morris felt the descent of an overmastering despair. Lost as he was in this awful transdimensional limbo, and separated from his comrade, whose fate he could not imagine, the prospect was indeed dreary and hopeless. His whole body ached with accumulated fatigue; his mouth and throat were afire with corrosive thirst.

Though the oxygen still poured freely from its tank, he could not tell how much of his supply remained. A few hours, at most, and then his ordeals might end in asphyxiation. Momentarily crushed by the horror of it all, he sat down on the crater slope in the rusty-brown gloom.

Curiously, the twilight did not darken. As if in a reversed ecliptic, the sun returned slowly into the heavens. But Morris in his despair, hardly heeded this *outré* phenomenon.

Staring dully at the re-illumined ground, he saw the appearance of several grotesque, anomalous shadows that fell past him on the slope. Startled from his lethargy, he sprang up. A dozen or more of the monstrous people had returned. Some of them were gnawing the cindery bodies of their companions. But three, as if disdaining such fare, were closing in upon Morris.

Even as he turned, they assailed him. One of them, a headless thing with ropy arms and a puckered, mouth-like orifice in the center of its gourd-shaped body, tried to drag him down with its frightfully elongated members.

Another, which might have been some heraldic griffin minus wings and feathers, began to peck at his air-suit with its tremendous horny beak. The third, which was more like a horribly overgrown toad than anything else, hopped about him on the ground and mumbled his ankles with its toothless mouth.

Sick with nausea, Morris struggled against them. Time and again he kicked away the toad-like creature, which returned with noisome pertinacity. He could not loosen the ropy members of the headless horror, which had wrapped themselves about him in plastic folds.

But his worst fear was that the griffin would tear open his leatheroid garments with its slicing beak. He hammered the huge bird-shaped body with his fists, driving it away repeatedly. But as if mad with rage or hunger, it reassailed him. His legs and body were sore in a dozen places from the blows of the cruel beak.

Beyond his attackers he caught involuntary glimpses of the horrid feast that was being enjoyed by their fellows. It was like the feeding of harpies in some infernal circle, and Morris could surmise his own imminent fate all too clearly. He saw that several of the feeders, quitting their half-eaten provender, were turning in his direction as if to join the three assailants.

Instinctively, as he fought on, he heard the sound of a measured drumming from above. The sound drew nearer and ceased. In a turn of the dying combat, he saw that two gigantic beings had arrived among the monsters, and were standing a little apart, as if watching the gruesome orgy with detached interest.

Even amid the frightful preoccupation of his struggles he noticed a strange thing. The new arrivals, alone of all the life-forms that he and Markley had met in this erratic world, seemed to approximate a common type of physical development.

Both of them stood erect, and their conformation was vaguely human in its outlines, except for the enormous wings, ribbed and leathery as those of ancient pterodactyls, which hung half-folded at their backs. Their coloration was a dark, bituminous brown, verging upon ebon blackness in the wings, and lightened somewhat in their heads and faces.

They were massively built with a stature of eleven or twelve feet and aquiline, sloping, hairless heads that denoted a large brain-capacity. No trace of ears could be detected, but two round, luminous, golden-yellow eyes were set far apart in their faces above sphinx-like mouths and nostrils. Somehow they made Morris think of Satanic angels,

but their aspect was not malign and was wholly poised, aloof and dispassionate.

Such were the impressions that he received, without conscious assortment or definition at the time. Without interlude, the atrocious battle with the three monsters continued. Presently, however, one of the gigantic winged beings moved with prodigious strides toward the earthman and his attackers as if to watch the uneven combat. Morris felt the regard of the great yellow eyes, which, inscrutable themselves, appeared to search him through and read the inmost secrets of his mind.

CHAPTER IV

Atomic Dust

THE being stepped closer, lifting an enormous hand in a leisurely but imperious gesture. As if fearful or cognizant of a superior power, the loathsome assailants abandoned their efforts to drag Morris down, and slunk away to assuage their hunger on an unpreempted bit of carrion that lay beside the pit in the crater's bottom.

A dreadful faintness surged upon the earthman—a reaction from all the intolerable horrors and fatigues of the day. Amid the whirling darkness into which he slid, he saw the gleaming of two mesmeric goldern eyes, and felt the firm grasp of giant hands that seemed to support and lift him.

An electric shock ran through him at their touch. Miraculously his faintness cleared away, leaving him wonderfully alert. Strength seemed to flow into him from the mighty hands—magnetic strength, buoyant and preterhuman. The horror faded from his shaken nerves. He was no longer lost and bewildered, but was filled with a mystic confidence.

The experience that he next underwent was perhaps the strangest of all that befell him in the dimension of chance. Also, it was the hardest to remember or describe.

Beneath the thrilling touch of the winged being whose hands held him firmly by the shoulders, he seemed almost to pass beyond his own consciousness. Thoughts that were not his own rose up and limned themselves with the clearness of actual visions of objective impressions.

In some ineffable way, he shared for a moment the thoughts and memories of the being who had rescued him from the monsters. Whether or not an intentional telepathy was being exerted, he never quite knew. But alien vistas, beheld through unfamiliar senses, appeared to open before him.

The two winged beings, he knew, were members of a race that was far from numerous. They were the rulers of this outlandish world, the self-made masters of its incalculable forces and disorganized elements. Their evolution had been supremely difficult and painful. Through their own volition, they had risen from a state that was little higher than that of the unhappy monsters.

They had developed faculties that enabled them to circumvent the lawlessness of their environment, to forecast its very randomness, to impose law and order on the ever-changing chaos. They had even learned to control their own development.

The nightmare hollow in which Morris stood had temporarily vanished. There came to him the sense of tremendous flight above strange horizons. He seemed to pass on lofty wings over wastes of choatically piled and tumbled rocks with the being whom he knew as one of the Masters of Chance.

Amid the shifting mirages of desolation, through distorting zones of air, above realms that pitched obliquely for immeasurable leagues, like the flattened side of some malformed planet, he flew unerringly to his destination.

Beyond the chaos, on tiered mountains that rose stupendously high, he beheld the high and many-terraced citadels of the Masters. As if he had trodden their battlements, he knew the white walls of a majestically ordered architecture that defied the erratic formlessness of the world beneath and imposed its harmonic sternness on the tumbled waste.

He knew the terraces, lined with geometric rows of trees and flowers, in which, by some miracle of horticultural mastery, the random flora had been subdued and had taken on the characters of type and species.

Dimly, to the limit of his human thought-capacity, he understood something of the Masters. Their powers were those of dynamic will, of magnetism and sense-development—and they did not depend entirely on mere physical science or machinery.

In former ages they had been more numerous, had ruled a larger area of that unstable, incalculably treacherous world. It seemed that the apex of their evolution had passed, that though they still were powerful, they were menaced more and more by the beleaguering forces of cosmic anarchy.

Such were the things that Morris learned in that moment of communion with his rescuer. Returning to his own proper consciousness, he felt also that the telepathic interchange had been mutual: the being had read his own history, his predicament of hopeless alienation in a strange world—and in some

inscrutably benign way, was minded to help him.

He felt no surprise, whatever, at the more *outré* happenings that ensued. Somehow, as if he shared the ability of his protector to read the future, all that occurred was familiar as a twice-told tale. In this bizarre but foreknown drama, the winged being lifted him gently but firmly, making a cradle of its vast arms, and spreading its ebon wings, mounted swiftly toward the misshapen sun.

Its companion followed, and Morris knew, as they flew steadily above the changing zones of gravitation, above the dreary jumble of the wandering mirages, that they were seeking Markley.

In a dim, partial way he seemed to share the clairvoyance of the Masters, which enabled them to distinguish the real from the illusory amid the disordered refraction of their atmosphere. He, too, was gifted with a televisual faculty by which he could scan the remote or hidden portions of the waste.

SURE and undeviating, the mighty leathern wings beat onward toward their goal. Amid the kaleidoscopes of desolation there appeared the rough rim of the valley in which Morris and Markley had left their rocket plane.

Swifter grew the beating of the wings, louder was their drumming, as if haste were needed. A strange anxiety mounted in Morris lest they should be too late.

Now they hovered above the valley, slanting groundward. The place had changed in some fashion that Morris could not define to himself at a moment. Then he realized that certain of the ringing bluffs and slopes had crumbled away, were still crumbling, to form a moving sea of hueless sand.

In places, columns of atomic powder mounted like geysers; some of the area of forestation had fallen into shapeless heaps of dust, like disintegrated fungi. These sudden, erratic, localized decompositions of matter were common phenomena of the world of chance. It came to Morris, as part of his mystic knowledge, that the order which the Masters had wrested from chaos was not wholly secure against their inroads.

Anxiously, with a breathless fear, he scanned the area into which the mighty being who carried him was descending on sloped wings. Markley was somewhere in that area. He had wandered back there in a blind, bewildered search for his lost companion, and danger—a double danger—threatened him now.

As if with the keen, straight-seeing eyes of the Master Morris discerned a rocket plane on the valley floor and knew it to be the one the Japanese had used. Seemingly it was deserted and the moving tide of sand from the crumbling cliffs engulfed it even as he watched.

In the middle of the valley, he described the glittering of another plane—the one that belonged to Markley. Four tiny figures were milling to and fro beside it in wild combat. Upon them, unheeded, the deluge of dissolution was advancing swiftly. The sands rolled in crested billows.

The trees swelled and soared to monstrous arboreal phantoms and dissolved in pulverous clouds. Pillars of freed molecules built themselves up from the valley-bottom and were shaped into ominous, floating domes that obscured the sun.

It was a scene of elemental terror and silent tumult. Across it, sloping and dipping, the wings of the Masters drummed, till they hovered above the knot of struggling figures.

Three men in helmets and air-suits were attacking a fourth, who was similarly attired. The weakness of the local gravity, however, made the combat less unequal than it might have seemed. Also, it served to lighten the blows which the contestants succeeded in delivering.

Markley, in great, twenty-foot leaps, was eluding the Japanese much of the time; but plainly he was tiring; and the three would corner him soon. Several automatic pistols, discarded as if empty or useless, were lying on the ground; but one of the Japanese had drawn an ugly, curved knife and was watching his chance for a thrust at the darting figure of Markley.

In their desperate struggle none of the four had perceived the arrival of the Masters. It was Markley who saw them first. As if stupefied, he paused in one of his rushes, and stared at Morris and the winged beings.

Two of the Japanese turned and also beheld the hovering figures. They stood petrified with astonishment or terror. But the third, intent on delivering a thrust with his wicked knife, had not seen them; and he flew in a long and vicious aerial leap at Markley.

The second Master, hanging in air beside Morris' protector, raised his right hand and pointed at the flying Japanese. For an instant, his fingers seemed to clutch and hurl a great javelin of living fire. The javelin leapt and faded—and the Japanese, a shapeless pile of fuming cinders, lay at Markley's feet.

The other two, shielding their goggled eyes with their hands, as if the terrible lance of light had blinded them, rushed toward the oncoming storm of atomic disintegration. Before them, on the valley floor, a sudden pillar of dust ascended, swelling awfully as it ate the conglomerate soil. It seemed to topple upon them and then, suddenly, they were gone.

MORRIS, watching in wordless awe, felt that the lifting arms had been withdrawn, that his feet had been set on the ground. Close above him, the two Masters towered, with spread wings. As if an urgent voice had spoken aloud, he knew the things that must be done without delay.

"Come—we can start the plane!" he cried to Markley. "We've got to move in a great hurry."

Markley, who had been staring at the Masters, appeared to emerge from a sort of trance.

"All right, if you say so—and if the fuel will explode," he agreed. "But before we go, I'd like to thank your winged friend for browning Sakamoto. I don't know how it was done; but he sure has a wicked jolt. That Jap would have laid me open like a dead fish in another split-second."

A sudden, howling wind blew down the valley, spreading the dust-billows like a blown spray, lifting the atomic columns into a roof of doom. Swiftly the storm of dissolution gathered, rushing toward the plane.

Markley, followed by Morris, sprang for the open manhole. While Morris swung the heavy lid into place, his companion leapt to the control-board. As if by some miracle of chance or some change in the unknown, interfering force, his pressure of the starting-lever was answered by the loud roar of discharging rockets. The plane lifted, acquiring momentum till it soared above the seething valley.

Looking back through one of the ports, Morris perceived the two flying colossi, who hung aloof in the heavens as if watching the departure of the plane. Serene, impassive, on poised wings, they floated beyond the atomic storm, which had already begun to subside.

He turned away with a strange awe, a reverential gratitude. Beneath Markley's skilful guidance, the plane was heading straight for the formless atmospheric blur that still blotted the reddish-brown sky.

Again Morris looked back. High, far and tiny, between the malformed sun and the chaotically strewn and riven world, the mysterious beings whom he knew as the Masters of Chance flew steadily on level wings toward their remote city. It was his last sight of them, and already the mystic knowledge that had been imparted to him was fading a little in his brain.

The telepathic vision of the citadels that imposed their severe architectural ordination on a mad terrain—the supernal, hard-won power of the Masters, battling perpetually against lawless elements and the treacherous, intractable forces of a cosmic Pandemonium—all had become slightly unreal, like a dreamland from which the dreamer is departing.

Now the blind aerial blur had enveloped the vessel. Greyness, clinging and all-pervasive, filled it like an atmosphere of cotton-wool. Sight, sound—even feeling and thought—were lost as if in some hinterland of oblivion.

Out of the blur, as if from a formless, hueless, dream of death between two lives, the plane and its occupants floated into the dark azure of the terrene stratosphere. Sight, consciousness, feeling, memory, rturned in a sudden flood to Morris and Markley. Below them again, they saw in mottled relied the familiar reaches of Nevada, edged with white and saw-like mountains.

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